

# When Leaders Fail

## Living with the Consequences of Missed Coaching Opportunities

BOB RUE

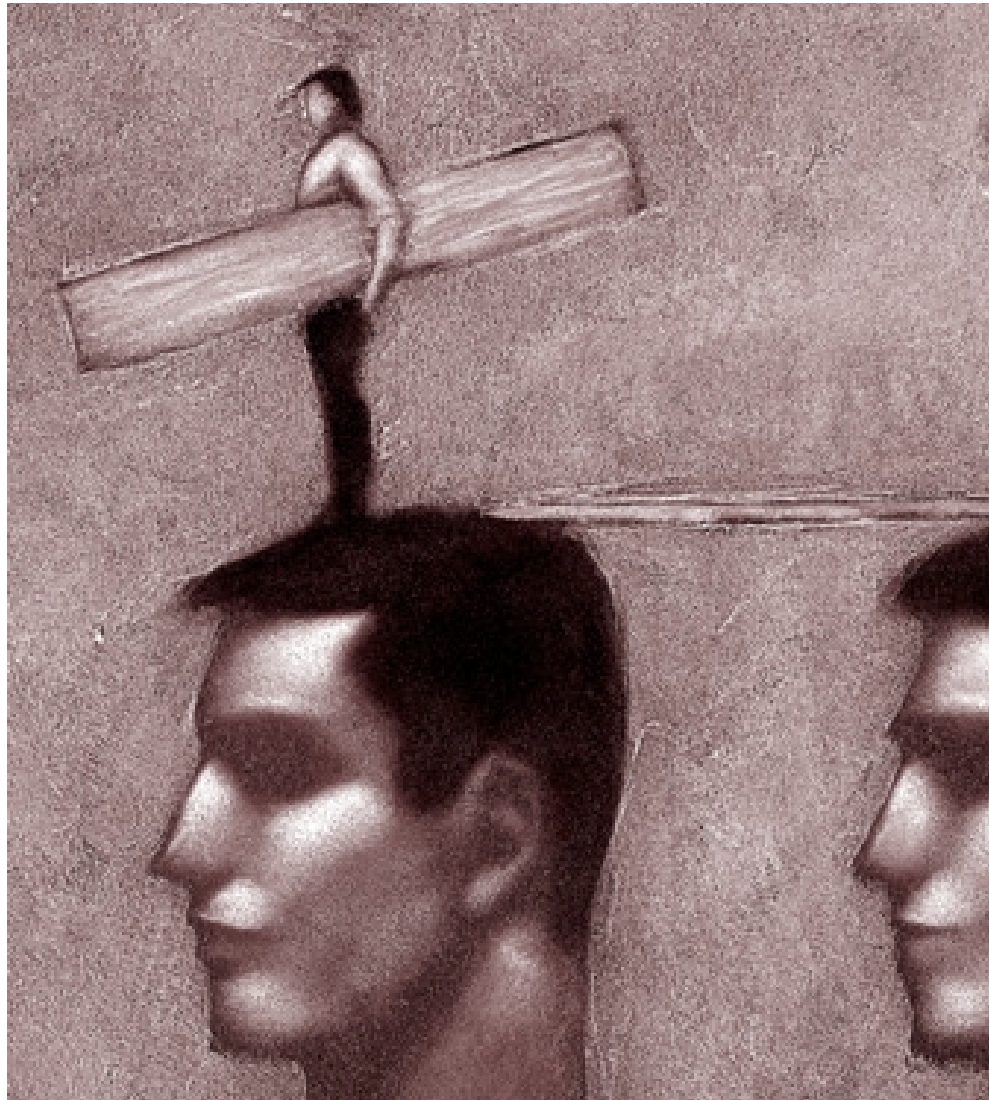
**I**'ve been fired." The words struck like thunder since the person on the other end of my email was a colleague whom I had grown to admire, even though I had never seen the quality of her work. Still, the person whom I had gotten to know appreciated continuous learning, was approachable, smiled easily, and had a natural curiosity about management and organizations.

"I'm not bitter—I'm kind of relieved," she continued. "I knew my boss believed that I wasn't worth training."

### Individual Worth

"Wasn't *worth* training?" I thought. "How can that be?" Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon event in most organizations. The root-causes of termination may be many. It may be due to a poor hiring decision based on the hiring supervisor's lack of clarity on the competencies required by the job. Perhaps the competency requirements are clear, but the candidate misrepresented their abilities. Perhaps employee dishonesty played a part. Maybe a simple personality conflict emerged. Frequently, however, a candidate is hired with limited competencies with the clear understanding that training and a suitable learning curve will backfill the candidate's knowledge gaps. And sometimes that development, along with some critical coaching, never takes place.

Nonetheless, firing someone for non-performance without the proper level of support for the learning that would have enabled the employee to succeed



is as glaring an indictment of the manager as it is the employee. *Both failed to perform.*

This article will look at the critical skills of performance coaching by su-

pervisors and managers with employees who report directly to them. In their role of managing the human assets of the organization, coaching skills are critical. What are coaching skills? How is coaching different from

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mentoring? Can the supervisors/managers develop their coaching skills? What consequences will supervisors/managers inevitably face without coaching? Of course, supervisors/managers who fail to understand the relationship that leaders develop with followers are also at a huge disadvantage. Therefore, this article will talk about supervisors/managers as coaches *and* leaders.

cess of the individual is defined by successful execution of the task(s) leading to the desired outcome. Thus, coaching may incorporate the teaching inherent in training. The difference, however, between coaching and training is that coaching also involves some diagnostic work to determine if training is appropriate, and if so, what training would be most effective? The coaching focus is to enable the person being coached

person going through adolescence). To the mentor, success of the entire person in the context of his or her life is the goal.

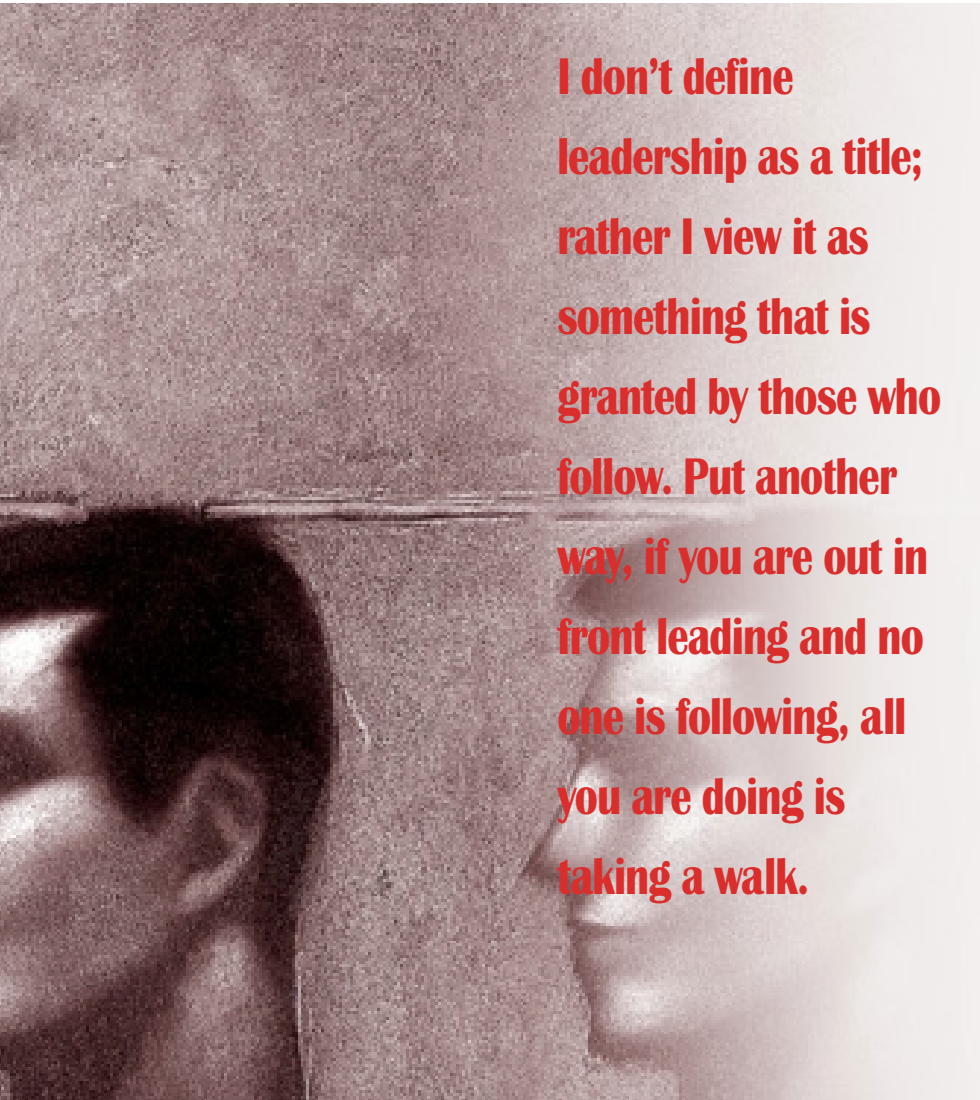
For example, a coach would help a subordinate develop the skills to master cost accounting. A mentor would go deeper (largely due to the deeper trust a mentor develops with the person being mentored), helping the person discover whether cost accounting is of sufficient interest to explore as a career field based on the individual's interests, hobbies, background, and beliefs. Many people go into a career field due to the work or expectations of their parents, regardless of their own personal interests. A coach might never touch upon this issue, whereas a mentor would probe it.

*Managers should coach as an expected part of their job.* Effective leaders coach *and* frequently they mentor as well because of the trust they engender with some of those who follow. Unfortunately, both terms are commonly used interchangeably. They are, however, intended to describe very different relationships.

Traditionally, coaching was intended to address a performance problem, thus preventing the derailment of a promising career. In *Executive Coaching: An Annotated Bibliography*, Christina A. Douglas and William H. Morley contend that coaching has further evolved to a method of enhancing the performance of high-potential talent.

As a professional observer of management *and* leadership over the past 30 years, this definition contains many of the elements of leadership. I don't define leadership as a title; rather, I view it as something that is *granted* by those who follow. Put another way, if you are out in front leading and no one is following, all you are doing is taking a walk.

By contrast, supervisor and manager are titles. Titles imply a span of responsibility. For example, a widget production manager is responsible for all aspects of widget production, while the widget quality control supervisor over-



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## **Defining Coaching and Mentoring**

Let's clarify the difference between *coaching* and *mentoring*. Coaching is the assistance offered on a specific goal/objective, is usually professional, and involves cognitive skill development or guidance in mapping a strategy to attain a desired outcome. To a coach, suc-

cess to accomplish a *specific* performance standard.

Mentoring involves supporting the *total* human package (i.e., personal development, professional development, etc.) and is much deeper and inclusive of the entire person (much like a close relative, scout leader, or minister to a young

sees the quality aspects of widget production. Unfortunately, nowhere is leadership of others implied; yet, it is very much a part of the job if supervisors/managers have anyone reporting to them.

When supervisors/managers choose to coach, they demonstrate key leadership skills. This is because the coach and the learner build a relationship of *joint* trust and dedication. Not surprising is the fact that those supervisors who coach with excellence are usually considered exceptional leaders by those they coach. Coaches demonstrate loyalty and commitment to their colleagues by paying attention to the overall development of those employees who are their direct subordinates.

### The Leader's Dilemmas

Leaders, i.e., supervisors/managers, are frequently "too busy" to pay much attention to the development of their most critical resource—their employees. When employees don't receive the training and support that enable them to succeed at job-related tasks, the meta message (i.e., the unspoken, frequently unconscious message that underscores every form of communication) sent to the employee is that they, *and the work they do*—are not very important nor of particular value to the organization.

Under-trained personnel are a huge drag on organizational effectiveness. Of course, they are inefficient. They lack critical skills that reduce them, over time, to incompetence. This places them in the humiliating position of appearing to their co-workers as providing little value. The longer it continues, the lower morale across the unit sinks, not only for the under-trained employee, but also for those who must pick up the additional burden of the employee's minimal effectiveness. Anger flares (usually at the employee), and unit cohesion deteriorates.

Interestingly, the discomfort of supervisors with their own inability to train others effectively, their lack of compassion for others, or their unconscious power issues that maintain rigid senior-

## Stages in the Change Process

### UNFREEZING

- Disconfirmation of old behaviors
  - Save Face (avoid defensive response)
- ↗ Anxiety about outcomes  
↘ Guilt about outcomes

### MOVING (i.e., Cognitive Restructuring)

- Coaching/Mentoring/Training
- Job rotation (On-the-job learning)
- Temporary assignment

### REFREEZING

- Successful outcomes aligned with goals
- Reward (intrinsic strongest form of reward)
- Recognition

subordinate (top-dog vs. bottom-dog) relationships, are frequently at the root of their reluctance to coach subordinates. *Coaching is an expression of leaders' personal commitment to their subordinates' success.*

Conversely, when employees and their supervisors design and implement a development plan to help employees *quickly* gain critical skills, the meta message is that they and their jobs are valued in the organization. When knowledge and skill are given to employees, they tend to use such attributes wisely. Learners esteem the teachers (supervisors, managers, or parents) who give them knowledge, then help them develop and apply it.

When employees are coached and given ample time to ascend their individual learning curves, both coaches *and* employees deeply explore the competencies exceptional job performance requires and whether or not employees have—or can develop—those essential competencies. When experience clearly demonstrates that the desired competencies are not present in employees, separation from the job (*not* necessarily the organization) becomes the obvious alternative to *both* parties. Thus, the potential negative impact on self-esteem of employees is reduced. They can move forward with greater clarity about their future job options. Likewise, managers

know what competencies are critical in finding successful replacements.

### A Coaching Case

As a new insurance industry supervisor in the late 1970s, my company hired an administrative assistant who I'll refer to as Pat. I did a poor job of interviewing Pat (of course, in those days I had never been offered training in interview techniques). I assumed that if she passed the company's screening, she was fully qualified. Pat appeared pleasant and committed to learning our business. She passed the requisite typing test administered by the company. She was hired and was very happy to have the job.

From the outset, however, Pat struggled with accuracy in typing and filing. We immediately worked on developing a strategy for helping her become more proficient. Pat was intelligent (she had a teaching degree) and was willing to work long hours if that would help her succeed. Her positive attitude was contagious throughout the office.

Over time, it became clear to *us both* that Pat's skills were simply too limited for secretarial work. I was really perplexed. Her limitations were making both of our jobs increasingly difficult. Mistakes slowed down our mutual productivity substantially since they meant more rework and proofreading. We both faced mounting pressure from management,

who grew increasingly frustrated over the poor quality of my customer correspondence. Even her increased attention to proofreading failed to improve the quality of her work. Documents were unavailable due to misfiling. My coaching efforts weren't working very well!

**Assuming that your direct subordinates understand what your expectations are without benefit of a recent conversation about those expectations—which are constantly changing with various situations—is unrealistic ... Assuming they will somehow “figure it out” without your help is also wishful thinking.**

Then one day, we were informally talking about her education degree. I was shocked to hear that Pat's degree was in special education working with learning-disabled children. I discovered that she loved working with children. When I asked why she wasn't teaching, she

told me she couldn't find a position in her field.

We agreed that she could use a portion of each workday for three months to hunt for such a position; in the meantime, I began learning something about special education and area schools specializing in teaching learning-disabled children. Within three months, Pat had found a position and left the insurance industry, not only with the sense that she had learned something valuable about herself, but also with her dignity intact.

I had learned much as well. During her search for an alternative field of work, Pat shared with me that she had moderate to severe dyslexia. Dyslexia is a condition that allows a dyslexic reader to see letters and numbers on the printed page as reversed. I learned that dyslexic children take much longer to learn to read since they see words that make no sense to them. At the time, I knew nothing about dyslexia. As I learned about this disability, I began to understand why she had such difficulty in proofreading and filing. When interviewing for her replacement, I was much clearer about candidate skills, performance expectations, attitude toward work, developmental needs, as well as dyslexia. The latter knowledge helped me understand my own daughter's learning disability several years later.

Coaching Pat allowed us the opportunity to build a relationship of trust. Without that trust, Pat would not have shared with me her knowledge of her disability. It was too personal—sharing it in public, too unsafe. Appearing incompetent in one's public work environment was too painful for her. Her confidence in my confidentiality was critical. I would have missed an opportunity to learn about a disability that counts thousands of people among its victims. I could well have repeated the same mistake in interviewing her replacement.

### **The Change Process**

Since coaching is concerned with the behavioral change of another person, it

makes sense for the coach to be familiar with a change model. Kurt Lewin's change model, shown on the previous page and described in his *Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science: Social Equilibria and Social Change*, outlines three stages in the change process: *Unfreezing*, *Moving* (cognitive restructuring), and *Refreezing*.

### **Unfreezing**

*Unfreezing* means coaching candidates discover (i.e., disconfirm) that their old behavior is no longer effective. This can be the most difficult of the stages. Often painful and confusing, *Unfreezing* can create vulnerability in change candidates. *Unfreezing* actually occurs at the precise moment when they *realize* that an old behavior, which has operated successfully for years, is no longer working for them.

This realization *only* takes place when change candidates feel anxiety about continuing the old behavior (perhaps the outcome is one that is unintended and unwanted), or guilty about using the behavior (perhaps it causes unnecessary stress on others).

The second ingredient for successful *Unfreezing* to occur is the need for change candidates to “save face.” This is the precise reason why effective coaching must take place in privacy. Most of us can relate to the humiliation of being singled out for criticism within a group. The emotional response is to become defensive and resist the value of the feedback. When this defensiveness takes place, disconfirmation cannot be successful.

Success in coaching someone through *Unfreezing* is to act in support by offering complete *emotional safety* during the *Unfreezing* stage. That support is granted when coaches remain in inquiry mode rather than losing patience and resorting to directive behavior.

### **Moving**

*Moving* means changes in attitude, values, structure, feeling, or behaviors—



what typically happens when people discuss and plan new actions. Old behaviors (sometimes old, trusted behaviors) are stripped away. The resulting vulnerability can be disconcerting. A new behavior is needed immediately to replace the old, disconfirmed behavior. This is the stage when coaching is effective. Change candidates welcome new skills that can be *directly linked* to their desired outcomes. Immediate practice of the new skill sets is required before change candidates become comfortable with the new behavior.

Coaches conduct the training or arrange for the training to take place. Sometimes, the most appropriate method of education is a temporary assignment or a complete job rotation. Sometimes, being sent to skill-building courses will provide a range of new behaviors—behaviors that candidates would not have been previously open to learning.

### Refreezing

*Refreezing* takes place once change candidates discover that outcomes are aligned with their ultimate goals. This success serves to reinforce the effectiveness of the new behavior.

In Refreezing, coaches provide feedback by pointing out effective use and results of the new skill(s). Further, coaches question how candidates *feel* about the results. For Refreezing to occur, candidates must sense the *intrinsic* satisfaction that comes with the results offered by mastery of a new skill. Once coaches recognize the successful change, recognition on the part of change candidates themselves accompanies the intrinsic reward, thus providing the foundations of Refreezing.

Understanding the change process that all of us go through whenever we want a different outcome to a particular situation offers coaches a theoretical framework on which to hang their coaching efforts.

### The Coach's Attitude

Before looking at the coaching process itself, it first makes sense to understand that coaching is an attitude—a frame of

mind. Effective coaches understand one basic caveat: people behave the way they do for a reason that to them makes sense. Whether it makes sense to the rest of the world is not the issue. Given their view of the world, their beliefs and their assumptions, their behavior—in the context of a specific situation—their actions make sense to them.

Coaches, therefore, need to adopt the approach of inquiry rather than censure. Where are the individuals being coached going off track? What is it about their view of the world, their beliefs, or their assumptions that requires realignment?

Pat, for example, knew her work was full of mistakes, and her mistakes were adding pressure to our working relationship. My demanding more of her would only have made a difficult situation even tougher. Once we had determined what was important to Pat and what she was educated to do, the solution became evident to us both. The result is that we became allies in finding a solution, rather than adversaries in attacking her incompetence. Effective leaders develop the ability to confront difficult situations while maintaining clarity about the needs of all involved, discovering common ground, and working toward a solution that moves the entire process forward toward the goal.

When parents coach, they achieve similar results. When trust builds jointly between child and parent, the parents' leadership relationship with the child strengthens. Coaching helps children develop their reasoning and problem-solving abilities as well as their communications skills. Coaching helps parents develop their listening skills and their ability to ask questions that safely and respectfully cut to the heart of issues.

### The Coaching Process

Once coaches are clear about their attitudes, they are ready to put into action the coaching process. Four distinct steps are involved in the coaching process:

- The initial meeting
- Assessment phase

- Feedback and development planning
- Plan implementation and follow-up monitoring and consultation.

### Initial Meeting

The initial meeting is designed to set goals and expectations for both the coach and the person receiving the coaching. What does the entire process look like? Who will have access to any data generated by the coaching (i.e., confidentiality)? What would both like as an outcome? How often should we meet? How should we meet? How will we know if we are successful? This meeting may be one-on-one, or may involve other appropriate personnel such as bosses, human resource personnel, or senior executives.

### Assessment Phase

The second step is the data gathering and assessment phase. This is where the relationship of trust begins to build. Various tools may be brought into the process such as 360-degree assessments (i.e., performance feedback gathered from the learner's boss, peers, and subordinates), performance reviews, interviews, and personality instruments. Information is gathered from multiple appropriate sources, including the coaching candidates, peers, coaching candidates' direct subordinates, family members, and friends. Typically, Unfreezing takes place during the assessment phase. Coaches facilitate Unfreezing by remaining in inquiry mode and allowing change candidates to discover the old behavior's effectiveness. Maintaining confidence and privacy are critical to building an environment of trust and emotional safety.

### Feedback and Development Planning

The third stage is the very heart of the coaching and aligns itself with the *Moving* stage of Lewin's model. Typically, this involves assessment feedback, building self-awareness for making needed behavioral changes, and planning a developmental path. This stage is where the critical skill of inquiry is required of coaches. This is where the individuals being coached need to assess and determine their own weaknesses and cre-

ate a plan for building effective, alternative behaviors. When the individuals being coached do not grasp a key element, coaches must continue asking questions about consequences and desired outcomes.

### **Plan Implementation and Follow-up Monitoring and Consultation**

Support to anyone attempting a change of behavior is critical. Different people require different methods and levels of support. During the fourth stage of the

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change process, and remaining in inquiry mode, coaches probe for the design elements of a follow-up monitoring process. What kind of mechanism works best for coaching candidates? How often should the coach check in? How will the candidate know that the change is working? Coaches are on the lookout for small changes that offer small rewards. These small, initial successes build change candidates' confidence and sense that they are on the right track.

A sound, disciplined follow-up plan is a critical element of successful and sustainable change. When change efforts fail, all too frequently a lack of effective and adequate follow-up is the root cause.

### **Consequences of Not Coaching**

Many years ago, as a young Army lieutenant, I learned a critical management lesson: your direct subordinates can make you look inept, even while they are technically "doing their job." When specific job training is lacking, employees follow the safest path: they follow the rules to the letter. If they are well trained, they can learn the subtle differences between various situations that call for a different approach. They learn how much latitude they have in decision making. They understand more clearly the boundaries of their roles. Conversely, they can accomplish great things once they believe in what they need to do. When they do good work, you as the supervisor look good.

The coaching relationship is most effective when the expectation of the supervisor acting as coach is discussed during the interviewing process. From Day No. 1 of a new hire appearing on the job, supervisors begin looking for behaviors that will hinder or help new employees transition into the working unit. If effective coaching is introduced early, employees begin to fear organizational change less, as they know they can depend on their supervisors to share information honestly and openly with them throughout the change process.

They begin to trust that their supervisors are watching for opportunities to help them strengthen their performance. They share questions and concerns more openly with their coaches, and the coaches learn about those facets of the employees' jobs that are particularly difficult, challenging, or rewarding. Perhaps the most strategically critical aspect of effective coaching is that employees are learning how to eventually supervise others by using the same skills their coaches used with them.

When supervisors establish a coaching relationship with each person in their

unit, they can begin to coach the unit in building unit interdependence and cohesion. At this point, employees within the unit begin to consistently excel by handling rapid change and supporting each other during times of intense work demands or absences due to vacations, illnesses, or separations.

Assuming that people understand all facets of their job, that they are all equally skilled at all facets of the job, or that they enjoy all facets equally are unrealistic assumptions. Likewise, assuming that your direct subordinates understand what your expectations are without benefit of a recent conversation about those expectations—which are constantly changing with various situations—is also unrealistic. Finally, assuming they will somehow "figure it out" without your help is wishful thinking.

One thing is certain. Behavior that falls short of expectations will continue unless supervisors/managers intervene. If you *always do* what you *always do*, you *always get* what you *always get*.

Perhaps my fired colleague was a poor "fit" for the job. Or, perhaps she could have enjoyed a rewarding and productive career in her old field, but we will never know for sure which is the case. We do know that the organization has to go through the expense and time to recruit a replacement, and once recruited, help that individual move through the learning cycle until he or she masters the work. That could take a year. Then again, if the individual receives no coaching, it could take much longer while history repeats itself.

Supervisors/managers who coach for change lessen the pain of change by developing trust that creates followers. These followers are more open to change, more able to develop, more satisfied with their work and coworkers, and ultimately, more able to contribute in the future. Isn't that leadership?

**Editor's Note:** The author welcomes questions or comments on this article. Contact him at [Robert.rue@hanscom.af.mil](mailto:Robert.rue@hanscom.af.mil).